



**Guidelines for Research  
June 2000**

## Introduction

The Scottish Traditions of Dance Trust was established in November 1995 to research, conserve, foster and promote **all** of Scotland's dance traditions. This document is intended as a guide to assist volunteer researchers and students involved in dance research.

Dance research should aim to record how people use and process dance in their lives.

In Europe, dance research is now accepted as a vital part of understanding dance culture. Contextual research is accepted as fundamental to the understanding of the complex phenomenon of dance.

The aim is to collect, analyse, compare and classify information by various means – by recorded interviews, video/film and photographic records, graphic notations and by participant observation and self experience. The processes of change within a dance type, dance use, and dance dialect by a social group may be deduced within interregional or time span boundaries.

Culturally relevant information is sought about people's own dance, based on their perceptions and explanations about dance as part of their particular universe at a certain time in history.

Dance interviews are usually held on a one-to-one basis; they are often personal and are therefore based on trust; as it usually occurs within a person's own home, it is very important that researchers are attentive, caring and respectful of an informant's feelings and opinions. The researcher should attempt to create a relaxed atmosphere. A first approach should be made by telephone or letter, and on arrival, the researcher should show some form of identification; the first visit should last no longer than one hour. After the final interview, a letter of thanks should be sent, confirming how the information will be used.

# Interviews

The first step is to find the people who are reported to be sources of information on dance in the locality; when your enquiries are complete, then proceed to arrange an interview.

There are 3 stages to successful interviewing:

- (a) Preparation
- (b) Managing the interview
- (c) Post interview procedures.

## (a) Preparation

Taking time to prepare for the interview is essential:

1. you will need some information about the person you're going to interview; try to find out some background about the informant's life and his/her involvement in dancing or other related interests. Think about which aspects of the informant's life experiences will be important to the project and think out how you can help them recall their dance related activities.
2. prior to the interview, read any local publications about leisure/dance activity within the last 50 years in the locality; then read through the Data Checklist, and become familiar with the questions you feel will provide useful answers. Adapt the questions to the person and his/her experience.
3. find out the location of the interview, and check how long it will take you to get there; it's best to have a room with few distracting noises, preferably where you are unlikely to be interrupted, and where it is warm and comfortable and you will both feel reasonably at ease.
4. try out your tape recorder at home first; insert new batteries; have a test run by interviewing a friend, then play it back to check:
  - (a) the volume
  - (b) to hear if you are doing too much speaking!
  - (c) to assess whether the answers you are receiving are useful, or whether you could have phrased the question another way.

**(a) Preparation (continued) - Using Your Tape Recorder - dos and don'ts**

**RECORDING**

DO practice before you go out for your first field trip.

DO check recorder controls are set correctly:

tape - normal  
Dolby - off  
Battery meter - off

But DO check battery strength during a recording after some time.

DO take spare batteries with you.

DO switch on the microphone (this is OFTEN forgotten and panic results - "Why can't I get a signal?")

DO position it sensibly.

DO check record levels - before and soon after starting your recording.

DO stick labels onto the cassettes immediately before putting cassettes into the machine for recording. (This can be done before you arrive at an interview.)

**AFTER RECORDING**

DO switch off the microphone (battery life in the microphones, UNLIKE the machines, is very long - providing you don't put the equipment away with it still switched on).

DO press STOP on the machine.

DO take batteries out of the machine at the end of the day.

When you get home break out the protective tags for every tape which is completely used up (or nearly so). This prevents you over-recording on the tape.

(But if you find you cannot press the RECORD button in when you want next to make a recording DON'T try force. Examine the cassette and see if it is one that has been protected - ie with its tags missing.)

When replacing batteries DON'T force the battery holder in and out of its place. Insert batteries with correct polarity.



## **(b) Managing the Interview**

Take time to settle in to the room, and generally try to make the informant relax.

1. explain that you would like to record the conversation, and, with permission, set up the tape recorder with the microphone reasonably near (within 3-4 feet) the informant. Do ask if you may use the mains electricity.
2. begin the tape by saying your own name and the date (this can be done earlier) and then ask the informant, for the sake of the tape, to give his/her name, and if possible, his/her age!!
3. always begin a new tape for each person you interview.
4. let the informant talk! Your job is to ask questions, guide the flow of the interview, and LISTEN.
5. keep questions short and clear and avoid the temptation to interrupt.
6. look attentively at the informant all the time, giving encouraging nods and smiles.
7. don't be afraid of pauses; leave the informant space to talk. If you don't get an immediate response to a question, just wait. Give the informant time to respond. Don't rush in to fill the silence. At the same time, be ready to use prompts when the informant has difficulty recalling something.
8. never cut the informant off mid-flow; a story once started, should be allowed to finish, no matter how irrelevant it seems.
9. avoid saying "uh-huh", "aye", "yes", "quite right" and such-like; rather use eye-contact and body language to show your interest in what is being said, rather than verbal reaction.
10. never contradict the opinions or prejudices of the informant; do not respond on a personal level. It is up to you to simply record his/her views.
11. avoid leading questions eg "The people in this area must have been quite poor, mustn't they?". Better to ask, "Were many people in this area poor?" Better still, "What was the standard of living like in this area?"
12. avoid double-barrelled questions eg, "What job did you do and what was your average wage?" Ask one at a time.
13. avoid vague, imprecise questions eg, "What were the people like in this area?"
14. try to avoid phrasing the questions in such a way that all the answers become a straight "Yes" or "No". It is more profitable to use phrases like, "tell me about ....." or, "can you describe.....?" to obtain fuller descriptions.

### **(c) Post Interview Procedures**

Switch off your tape and thank the informant for his/her time, contribution and willingness to take part. Explain the purpose of the release document and ask him/her to sign it.

1. don't rush away; stay to chat for a few minutes if you feel that the informant would like that; on the other hand, he/she may be tired; judge the situation sensitively.
2. remove the tabs from the top of the cassette to prevent the interview from being "wiped".
3. mark the name of the informant and the date and place on the cassette immediately.
4. make an immediate copy of the master tape when you get home; send the master tape back to base, and keep the copy as a working copy.
5. listen to the tape as soon as possible, more than once; decide if a return visit would clarify some issues; make a note of further questions for clarification.
6. transcribe the tape according to the guidelines (FW1)
7. analyse the tape and transcript according to the guidelines (FW2)
8. fill in a Summary Sheet (FW3)
9. make a note of the main topics on the box of the tape, if possible with tape numbers.
10. send the summary sheet, release form and original transcriptions to the Scottish Traditions of Dance Trust head office.
11. remember to write a thank you letter after the final interview.

## Data Checklist

This DATA CHECKLIST is meant to be a FRAMEWORK to help formulate questions during an interview and to order the material collected from it. The checklist is divided into seven suggested areas of enquiry which should be viewed and used as a guide. Please note: the suggested questions are not necessarily in the order in which they should be used during an interview.

The seven suggested areas of enquiry are as follows:-

- 1 Data about DANCE TRADITIONS
- 2 Data about OCCASIONS & VENUES
- 3 Data about the PROCEDURE AT DANCE OCCASIONS
- 4 Data about LEARNING & TRANSMISSION
- 5 Data about SOCIAL GROUPS; DANCE PERFORMANCE
- 6 Data about MUSIC FOR DANCE
- 7 Data about FORM AND STYLE - TECHNICAL DANCE ANALYSIS

Please note: data about the informant and social context should also be collected and used to complete the SUMMARY SHEET (FW3) (see page 15 – *Essential Information*).

### INFORMANTS

Because the local repertoire of dances is always changing, and the manner of dancing is always changing, it is important to interview all 3 generations:

15 - 40

40 - 65

65 – 100+

It is also preferable to have some informants from urban backgrounds and some from rural backgrounds; if possible, some informants from upper social classes could contrast with those from working backgrounds.

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The checklist questions are adapted and developed from Roderyk Lange, "Guidelines for Field Work on Traditional Dance - Methods and Checklist" *Dance Studies Vol. 8*, 1984.

## 1. Data about DANCE TRADITIONS

Can you remember the names of the dances? Are they still danced today?

Which of these dances did you most enjoy? Why?

Were any of these dances rather special for you?

Name your favourite dance. Why is/was it a favourite?

Were most dances for sets of people?

Were most dances for twos?

Can you remember any reels? What sort of reels can you remember?

Can you recall any strathspeys or slower dances?

Were there any solo dances? If so, which ones?

Which dances did you do in a square or in a big circle?

What was the most exciting dance?

What was the most difficult dance?

Which dance steps did you find easy to do?

Can you remember the best dancer?

Why was he/she the best?

Where did he/she dance in the set?

Can you remember the worst dancer?

Why was he/she the worst?

Where did he/she dance in the set?

Which was the dance with the fastest music?

Which was the dance with the slowest music?

Which step did you do in the centre of the Eightsome Reel?

Were there any people who came just to spectate?

What is your opinion of the dances of today and of those of the past?

What changes have you seen in the way people dance today from the way people danced in the past?

Do you recall the names of any dances your parents danced?

Have some of their dances become extinct? When did they die out?

Were there any separate dances for boys only or girls only? If so, can you name the dances?



## 2. Data about OCCASIONS & VENUES

On what occasions did/do you dance? [e.g. weddings, other celebrations, harvest etc.]

At what time of year did most of the dances take place?

On which day of the week did most dance occasions take place?

Do you remember certain days/events in the year which were followed by a dance? [e.g. carnival, gala etc.]

Where did the dances take place?

Did you dance at home?

Did you ever dance out of doors?

Did you dance at weddings?

Were there any social club/sports club dances?

Did you dance at other celebrations – if so, which?

How long did a wedding celebration last – a day, several days?

Did you dance in nearby localities – if so, where?

Was there any rivalry between the two localities?

On what occasions did your parents dance?

### 3. Data about the PROCEDURE AT DANCE OCCASIONS

At what age did you first attend dances? Was this standard practice throughout the area?

How often did dances take place?

At what time did they start/finish?

How did you travel to and from the dance?

At what time of year were the dances?

What did you wear for the dance, including footwear? Describe both men's and women's clothes.

What did you wear at a) small local dance? b) wedding? c) ball? d) a military occasion?

Who organised the dances?

Who led the dances?

Was there a master of ceremonies?

What did it cost?

Where were the dances held?

Was there a special order of dances? – who decided the order of the dances?

What was the first dance?

What was the last dance?

Was there any convention/significance attached to dancing the last dance of the evening?

Was there an interval? What happened in the interval?

Where did the boys/girls sit between dances?

Could girls dance together? Could boys dance together?

Were there any traditional ceremonies during the wedding celebrations? Any special dances?

What were the expected manners at dances? [e.g. to invite someone to dance and the manner of parting after a dance?]

What happened after the last dance?

How long did a wedding celebration last? – a day? several days? weeks?

What were the refreshments/food at the dance and when were they taken?

#### 4. Data about LEARNING & TRANSMISSION

How did you learn to dance?

From whom did you learn to dance?

Did you learn by formal lessons?

Did you learn from a family member?

Did you learn by watching?

Did you learn by dancing with someone who already knew the dances?

How often did you have “lessons”?

When did the “lessons” take place?

Where did the “lessons” take place?

How long did they last?

What dances did you learn?

At what age did you start to dance?

Who were the main teachers in the area?

How strict were the teachers about dance technique?

Any influence of a “big hoose”?

Did you teach somebody else to dance?

Do you remember any new dances arriving?

If so, did incomers introduce them?

Who were the incomers? Where were they from?

Which new dances do you remember?

Did you go to other localities to dance and learn new dances?

Did you learn dances in the military services?

## 5. Data about SOCIAL GROUPS, DANCE PERFORMANCE

With whom did you dance? [e.g. school friends, work colleagues, friends, family members etc.]

Were your favourite dances couple dances or group/set dances?

Did you perform solo dances?

Did you take part in dances, or watch dances?

Did/do you belong to a dance group or club?

Did you dance in performances, competitions or gatherings of dance groups?

Did you compete in Highland Games dance events? If so, which Highland Games?

In which dances did you compete?

At what age did you start to compete?

At what age did you stop competing?

Did you enjoy competing?

Do you approve of competitive dance?

What do you consider to be its benefits or drawbacks?

What do you feel about competitive Highland Dance today?

Are you part of a performing dance group in a different style of dance?

Have you ever performed in front of an audience?

At what age did you start performing?

What was the first dance you learned to perform?

Who directed the performance group?

How often did you rehearse?

What was the procedure during rehearsal?

On what occasions did you give a performance?

Who was present at the performance?

Can you remember with whom you danced or had to dance during the performance?

## 6. Data about MUSIC FOR DANCE

Who played music for the dances?

What instruments were used?

Were the musicians local?

Did they compose some of their own tunes for the dances?

Did they rearrange tunes?

Can you name the tunes?

Can you remember any new instruments coming in to the band?

What and when were the changes?

Did the band introduce any new dances?

Did the band receive payment? How much?

How were they hired?

Do you remember any changes in the band – new people, new instruments etc.?

If there was no band, who or what provided the music?

Did anyone sing to accompany the dances?

Who is your favourite band/musician?

Which instrument is your favourite for accompanying Scottish dancing?

Did/do you play a musical instrument?

What is your favourite sound to dance to – e.g. solo voice? band? solo fiddle? pipes? – other? (gramophone?)

Did anyone sing with the band as you were dancing? Give details

Could anyone request the band to play a specific dance?

Could anyone ask the band to play faster/slower?

Can you name your favourite band?

Why was it the favourite?

Do you remember the band introducing a) new dances? b) new tunes? - which tunes?

Did the tempo of the music alter as the evening progressed?

Was there any special name for this change of tempo?

## 7. Data about FORM & STYLE - TECHNICAL DANCE ANALYSIS

Can you remember which different types of dance you did? (e.g. longways set dances, solo dances, couple dances, big circle dances, square dances, reels, strathspeys etc.)

Which type was your favourite?

Can you name any steps you danced?

What was your favourite step? Can you show it to me?

Did you learn many steps?

Were there any steps with stronger beats or stamps?

Did you have any special steps you danced in reels? Can you show them to me?

Can you name/describe some setting steps?

Can you name/describe some travelling steps?

Did the men dance the steps any differently from the ladies?

What floor patterns can you remember? (e.g. 4 hands across; reels of three or four; set and turn corners etc.)

Did you put your arms in the air at any time? Can you show me how?

When did you lift them up and lower them?

Did you dance any slower steps? (e.g. in strathspeys)

Can you remember any strathspey steps? Can you show me?

Did you dance any dances which changed rhythm? (e.g. from strathspey to reel or vice versa)

Can you name any of these dances?

How was the change in rhythm marked?

Did you prefer slower dances or faster dances?

Which of the following words best describe your own personal dancing style:-  
light; strong; relaxed; flowing; energetic; earthbound; bouncy; smooth; elegant; tight-stepping; rule-bound; improvisatory.



## Data about FORM & STYLE - TECHNICAL DANCE ANALYSIS (cont.)

Which of these words would best describe the favourite dancing style in your locality:-  
light; strong; relaxed; flowing; energetic; earthbound; bouncy; smooth; elegant; tight-  
stepping; rule-bound; improvisatory.

Which dance feels the most “Scottish” to you?

What is it that makes it feel Scottish?

What in your opinion makes a “good” Scottish dancer?

### **Detailed description of dance form and style**

[N.B. apply these questions to each dance remembered by the informant or alternatively  
apply to one favourite dance]

Describe the setting of the dance (e.g. one big circle round the room, sets of eight couples,  
square sets, couples round the room, etc.)

Describe the introduction - the preparation for the dance - the announcement, invitation  
to a partner etc.

Describe the dance patterns in detail, including how any progressions occur. Name any  
special steps and figures in the dance.

Describe any shouts, stamps, improvisations which may occur in the dance.

Describe how dancers thank their partner and how the dancers disperse.

## Essential Information

The following data should be collected and used to complete the Summary Sheet (FW3), and is useful for providing background information. It is often a good idea to begin an interview with such questions as they can help an informant to relax.

### Data about the INFORMANT

Surname and Forename.

If possible, date and place of birth.

Present address.

Date of interview.

Past or present work and hobbies.

The period of life (which years) from which the dance recollections are made.

### Data about the SOCIAL CONTEXT

Name of village, town or city, city district to which information relates.

Landscape (topography).

Communications - roads, rail, sealinks, airlinks.

Population of village or district.

Occupations - agricultural, industrial, past/present.

Economic state of the district at the time to which the information relates

Composition of population - age, sex.

Typical climate.

Any special religious influences.

Historical changes in village/town/city which influenced changes in dance habits.

Local schools' attitude to/support for traditional Scottish dancing?

Local community's attitude to/support for traditional Scottish dancing?

## Other Sources of Information on Dance

Copies of dance manuscripts.

Newspaper cuttings from local papers of the past.

The Scots Magazine - past articles on dance.

Society records from family libraries.

Photographs, records, musical instruments, dance clothing, dance programmes, diaries, scrapbooks, films, videos.

Extracts from local history records.

## Transcribing Tapes

FW1

1. Ensure that you have made a back-up copy before you begin, and transcribe from the copy rather than the original tape.
2. Transcribe the words in the way people say them - do not attempt to correct grammar or paraphrase.
3. Do not include every sound in the interview, eg the “ums,” “ers,” stutters and so forth. While these will inevitably occur it can be embarrassing for the informant if they ever read the transcript. You should, however, use three dots ... to indicate that something has been left out.
4. Do not transcribe repetition. This can be indicated using three dots ... as above.
5. Again, if someone talks of something not relevant to the project, for example the weather, what they're doing tomorrow - use your judgement. If appropriate omit transcription and indicate with three dots ... that something has been left out.
6. If you can't understand something, or can't make out what has been said use the following indicators: [?] for the omission of a word and [ ? ] for the omission of a phrase/sentence. It is important to differentiate between text which has been omitted due to stumbling/repetition/irrelevance and that which is unintelligible.

(Adapted from: *Scottish Ethnology Class Book 1998/99*, produced by the School of Scottish Studies, University of Edinburgh.)

## Summary Sheet (one sheet to be completed for every tape)

FW3

SDA:

Archive No:

Fieldworker:

Date:

Place of Recording:

Geographical Area to Which Information Relates:

Period to Which Information Relates:

Informant(s):

Approximate Age:

Area of Birth:

Current Address .....

.....

### Tape Content

Categories Covered:      1      2      3      4      5      6      7  
(please circle)

Summary:

N.B. A release form must also be completed and signed by each informant. These can be obtained from STDT, 54 Blackfriars Street, Edinburgh EH1 1NE. Phone/Fax: 0131-558 8737. Email: [edinburgh.stdtd@virgin.net](mailto:edinburgh.stdtd@virgin.net)

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